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Fred J. Thumin^a & Laurie J. Thumin^b

^a Washington University in St. Louis

^b Cambridge University

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The Measurement and Interpretation of Organizational Climate

FRED J. THUMIN

Washington University in St. Louis

LAURIE J. THUMIN

Cambridge University

ABSTRACT. This study describes the development and application of a new organizational climate instrument, the Survey of Organizational Characteristics (SOC). The participants in the development phase were 94 master's of business administration students, and the participants in the validation phase were 77 medical professionals: 24 medical faculty, 17 postdoctoral students, and 36 medical technicians. The final instrument consisted of 8 relatively independent scales with alpha coefficients based on the combined sample ranging from .77 to .98, and with 6 coefficients that were higher than .90. Validity hypotheses based on a priori knowledge about the 3 medical groups were for the most part well substantiated, although the small sample of postdoctoral students was a limitation. In relation to the findings, an attempt was made to clarify and perhaps narrow several of the conceptual and methodological gaps that persist between organizational climate and organizational culture.

Keywords: employee attitude, job satisfaction, organizational climate, organizational climate survey, organizational culture, organizational culture survey, psychological climate

FOR A CRUCIAL FIRST STEP IN ORGANIZATIONAL ANALYSIS, managers often find it advisable to obtain a measure of organizational climate. During the 1960s and 1970s, a considerable amount of research was devoted to organizational climate, which researchers viewed as a very fruitful line of investigation. Unfortunately, as Glick (1985) noted, "conceptual and methodological problems appear to have reduced climate research to a trickle" (p. 613). He concluded that if conceptual and methodological issues cannot be resolved, climate may not remain a viable research topic or management tool. More recently, Schneider attributed the slowdown in part to a proliferation of climate scales (2000) and (more optimistically) to greater acceptance of the climate concept (1985).

Address correspondence to Fred J. Thumin, Washington University in St. Louis, University College/Psychology Department, # 1 Brookings Drive, Campus Box 1085, St. Louis, MO 63130, USA; fjthumin@wustl.edu (e-mail).

But the subject has become increasingly complicated by issues that, at times, have seemed rather esoteric and impractical, especially from the perspective of practitioners. Reichers and Schneider (1990, p. 14) bemoan the fact that so many articles have resorted to haggling over definitions or elaborating on nuances of climate, and Pettigrew (2000, p. xv) reminds us of the virtues of simplicity of expression in dealing with complex human and organizational behavior. Questions have been raised about the relation of climate to culture, the relation of job satisfaction to climate, the appropriate level of cultural analysis, the relative value and appropriateness of various research methodologies, the use of descriptive statements versus evaluative statements, the difference between psychological and organizational climates, and how data should be aggregated.

Such questions are, of course, quite legitimate and are to be expected as a field of study matures, but it may be that obsessive hairsplitting has brought us to the point where we have lost sight of the forest for the trees. The objective of the present study is to discuss the development and application of a new climate instrument, the Survey of Organizational Characteristics (SOC), and with reference to the findings, reflect on several of the perplexing questions that have been raised in the ongoing debate between climate folks and culture folks. An attempt is made to shed at least a modest ray of light on several conflicting issues of long standing and to offer a few suggestions that might finally close (or at least narrow) the gap between these two cantankerous siblings.

Method

Subjects

In Phase 1 of the study (the questionnaire development phase), the participants were 94 master's of business administration (MBA) students enrolled in evening organizational behavior classes at a major state university. The sample was essentially a working population, with 94% of the group currently employed full-time, and with another 4% employed part-time. All participants indicated that they had held a significant full-time position at some time in their lives, either currently or previously.

In Phase 2 (the validity phase), three groups of medical professionals employed at a leading private medical school served as participants: 24 faculty (i.e., department heads), 17 postdoctoral students (research assistants), and 36 medical technicians. From this point forward, these three groups will be referred to as "Faculty," "Postdocs," and "Techs," respectively.

Materials

The climate instrument was developed and refined over several years using a number of MBA student groups. In generating statements for the original questionnaire, an attempt was made to cover the most significant aspects of organizational life in an employment setting, including (but not limited to) such things

as managerial style and attitude, communication, job satisfaction, planning and organizing, and community involvement. Initially, 181 statements were generated, based on the idea that all items should be realistic and meaningful to the average employee—representative of the kinds of things that employees often say about the organization for which they work. Realistic language was used, with no attempt to force commonly expressed complaints (e.g., “In this organization, it is quite common for bosses to take credit for their subordinates’ work or ideas”) into a positive format.

Procedure

In Phase 1, subjects were asked to refer to their present job (or to the most significant job they had ever held) in completing the climate questionnaire. Specifically, they were instructed to indicate on a 4-point scale the extent to which they agreed or disagreed with each of the 181 statements (i.e., strongly agree, agree, disagree, strongly disagree). Factor analysis and item analysis were then used to reduce the 181 items to 83 items and to form scales based on clusters of substantially correlated items—a process that resulted in seven relatively distinct scales or climate dimensions. In this report, the terms “scale” and “dimension” will be used interchangeably.

Each of the seven scales was scored by calculating for each participant the percentage of the highest possible score. For example, Scale F (Organizational Honesty and Integrity) consists of 15 items, each of which was scored as either 4, 3, 2, 1; or 1, 2, 3, 4, depending on the direction of the statement (i.e., positive or negative). The higher was the score, the more favorable the attitude was judged to be. Thus, on Scale F, the highest possible score was 60 (4×15). If an applicant had a raw score of, say, 45, the converted score was 45 divided by 60, yielding 75%.

In Phase 2, the 83-item questionnaire was administered to the three groups of medical school personnel, and the data were analyzed to determine the reliability and validity of the SOC scales. Specifically, the reliability coefficients obtained with the medical professionals were compared with those obtained with MBA students to determine whether the reliability of an instrument that was developed with one group would be equally reliable when used with a different group.

The validity of the instrument was determined by using *t* tests to compare the mean scores of the three medical school groups on seven different climate dimensions and on the composite score (SOC). Because the work attitudes of the three employee groups were known to differ substantially, it was anticipated that significant differences would result.

Hypotheses

Although the three samples in the validation phase of the study were relatively small, they represented three distinct, clearly defined employee groups with

allegedly different attitudes toward their work situation. According to school administrators, the morale of the Techs was very poor as compared with the Faculty and Postdocs because the Techs felt constrained, felt low in status and prestige, and were often not given sufficient information to understand the "big picture." Moreover, they felt stymied in their careers in that they had little or no opportunity for advancement. Consequently, transfers and turnover rates were quite high among this group.

By contrast, the Postdocs perceived their jobs as very relevant to career advancement. Although their positions at the university were usually temporary, the work would clearly help launch them on successful careers on completion of training. Members of the Faculty were permanent, tenured employees of the university and directed the work that they regarded as important, interesting, and relevant.

It was felt that attitudinal differences among the three employee groups should be reflected in the climate survey. Specifically, it was hypothesized that the SOC composite score based on all seven scales would be higher (more favorable) among Faculty and Postdocs than among Techs. It was further hypothesized that the Faculty and Postdocs would score higher than the Techs on the Job Satisfaction scale. An additional expectation was that the permanent Faculty members would feel that they had more of a future with the organization than either the Postdocs (who typically left on completion of their work) or the Techs (among whom transfers and turnovers were high). Other differences between the three groups were not precluded, but the foregoing expectations seemed to be relatively parsimonious and to make the most sense on a logical basis.

Results and Discussion

Item Analysis

Table 1 shows a representative statement for each of the SOC scales, as well as the item-scale correlation for each sample statement. It is noted, however, that only the first seven scales (A through G) were used in Phase 2 (the validity phase) of the study. Scale H (Reward System) was developed after completion of Phase 2, and the research was based on a separate sample of 60 MBA students. To ensure scale consistency, no item was included in a scale unless it correlated by at least .40 with the total scale score. The items in Table 1 had the highest item-scale correlations and can therefore be viewed as the most representative of each scale.

Scale Reliability

Glick (1985) and Ashkanasy, Broadfoot, and Falkus (2000) have called attention to the importance of establishing the reliability and validity of climate measures. The latter's review of 18 climate instruments published from 1975 through 1992 showed that only 5 reported reliability information.

TABLE 1. A Representative Statement for Each of the Eight Scales

Scale	Representative statement	Item-scale correlation
A. Organizational Flexibility	Getting a procedure changed in this organization is like trying to "fight City Hall."	.70
B. Consideration	My boss is generally very approachable and easy to talk to.	.82
C. Job Satisfaction	My job provides me with plenty of opportunity to make decisions on my own.	.86
D. Structural Clarity	When employees need help in this organization, they often don't know whom to turn to.	.73
E. Future With the Organization	I don't see much of a future for myself with this organization.	.77
F. Organizational Honesty	People generally get ahead in this organization on the basis of what they know, not whom they know.	.78
G. Community Involvement	This is a community-oriented organization that tries to enhance the growth and development of the area.	.85
H. Reward System	In this organization, there is definitely a payoff for those employees who work hard and productively.	.88

Note. All *rs* are based on *N* of 171, with the exception of Scale H, which is based on *N* of 60.

Table 2 shows the Kuder-Richardson Formula 20 and alpha reliability coefficients for the combined sample ($N = 171$); and for the 94 MBA students and the 77 medical personnel separately. The reliability coefficients, for the most part, are very substantial, revealing a high degree of internal consistency. Specifically, alphas based on the combined sample range from .77 to .98, and six of the eight scales have coefficients higher than .90. It is also encouraging that the reliability of the scales, which were developed with MBA students, held up equally well when used with an entirely different group of subjects (medical personnel). The apparent robustness of the scales may be attributable to the fact that they were developed with a heterogeneous group of employees—94 MBA students working at nearly as many firms and in a variety of positions—(as opposed to developing scales with a group of employees working at the same firm in similar positions).

TABLE 2. Reliability Coefficients of Survey of Organizational Characteristics (SOC) Scales Based on Diverse Samples

Scale	N items in scale	MBA students (<i>n</i> = 94)		Medical personnel (<i>n</i> = 77)		Total sample (<i>n</i> = 171)	
		<i>KR20</i>	<i>a</i>	<i>KR20</i>	<i>a</i>	<i>KR20</i>	<i>a</i>
A. Organizational flexibility	18	.92	.93	.88	.92	.90	.93
B. Consideration	13	.92	.93	.85	.93	.89	.93
C. Job Satisfaction	11	.83	.90	.91	.94	.88	.92
D. Structural Clarity	8	.76	.74	.82	.79	.78	.77
E. Future With the Organization	12	.95	.92	.91	.89	.93	.91
F. Organizational Honesty	15	.90	.92	.91	.93	.91	.93
G. Community Involvement	6	.82	.82	.81	.78	.80	.80
H. Reward System	10	.88	.82	—	—	—	—
I. SOC	83	.91	.97	.95	.98	.93	.98

Note. KR20 = Kuder-Richardson Formula 20. Scale H (10 items) was added later, and its coefficients were established using a different group of 60 master's of business administration (MBA) students.

Scale Validity

Table 3 compares the scores of the three medical groups by *t* test. As hypothesized, based on a priori information about the groups, the Faculty scored significantly higher on Scale E (Future With the Organization) than both the Techs ($p < .001$) and the Postdocs ($p < .01$). Also as predicted, the Faculty scored significantly higher than the Techs on the Job Satisfaction scale ($p < .001$) and on the combined SOC scale ($p < .01$). It was expected that the Postdocs would also score higher than the Techs on these same two scales (i.e., Job Satisfaction and SOC), but the differences, while the right direction, were not quite significant (due perhaps in part to the small size of the Postdocs sample, i.e., $n = 17$).

Although not hypothesized, it is interesting that on Scale D (Structural Clarity), the Techs scored significantly lower than both the Faculty ($p < .05$) and the Postdocs ($p < .01$). Further, the Techs scored lower on Scale A (Organizational Flexibility) than the Postdocs ($p < .05$) and lower on Scale F (Organizational Honesty) than the Faculty ($p < .01$).

The primary limitation of the present study was the rather small sample sizes of the three validation groups, especially the Postdocs with an *n* of only 17. Although

TABLE 3. Means of Medical Faculty, Postdocs, and Techs Compared by *t*-Test

Scale	Postdocs vs. techs			Faculty vs. techs			Faculty vs. postdocs		
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>t</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>t</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>t</i>
A. Organizational Flexibility									
Faculty	67.0	13.5		Faculty	67.0	13.5	Postdocs	67.4	5.3
Techs	61.5	11.6	1.67	Postdocs	67.4	5.3	Techs	61.5	11.6
									2.54*
B. Consideration									
Faculty	77.5	16.3		Faculty	77.5	16.3	Postdocs	74.9	11.7
Techs	75.7	12.6	.48	Postdocs	74.9	11.7	Techs	75.7	12.6
									.23
C. Job Satisfaction									
Faculty	84.1	13.4		Faculty	84.1	13.4	Postdocs	76.6	11.6
Techs	69.9	13.4	4.03***	Postdocs	76.6	11.6	Techs	69.9	13.4
									1.78
D. Structural Clarity									
Faculty	71.4	14.0		Faculty	71.4	14.0	Postdocs	71.7	6.1
Techs	64.4	12.3	2.04*	Postdocs	71.7	6.1	Techs	64.4	12.3
									2.91**
E. Future With Organization									
Faculty	75.2	11.9		Faculty	75.2	11.9	Postdocs	64.6	11.3
Techs	58.2	12.2	5.33***	Postdocs	64.6	11.3	Techs	58.2	12.2
									1.82
F. Organizational Honesty									
Faculty	74.3	13.2		Faculty	74.3	13.2	Postdocs	68.6	6.6
Techs	65.5	10.1	2.92**	Postdocs	68.6	6.6	Techs	65.5	10.1
									1.14
G. Community Involvement									
Faculty	64.2	12.6		Faculty	64.2	12.6	Postdocs	59.4	11.6
Techs	60.2	12.6	1.21	Postdocs	59.4	11.6	Techs	60.2	12.6
									.21
H. Total Score (SOC)									
Faculty	73.7	12.2		Faculty	73.7	12.2	Postdocs	69.5	7.2
Techs	65.3	9.6	2.99**	Postdocs	69.5	7.2	Tech	65.3	9.6
									1.61

Notes. SOC = Survey of Organizational Characteristics. Sample sizes are 24 Faculty, 17 Postdocs, and 36 Techs.

* $p < .05$. *** $p < .001$.

these rather well-defined employee groups did result in significant differences, and in the expected directions, the SOC certainly needs to be crossvalidated with larger groups of employees, and other than in a medical setting. Subsequent research will focus on using the SOC with two levels of employees (namely, managerial and entry-level) in a business setting. Specifically, the data will be compared to determine whether the scale reliabilities and validities hold up as well with these new groups as they did with MBA students and medical personnel in the present investigation.

Is Climate a Global or Multidimensional Measure?

Climate is, of course, both a global measure and a multidimensional measure. As stated by Schneider (1990, p. 29), "Climate and culture are at the same time both monolithic constructs and multidimensional ones." Climate can certainly be viewed as an all-encompassing measure, such as that represented by scale SOC in the present study. But climate is assuredly multidimensional, and can be subdivided into some finite number of reasonably independent dimensions, each of which contributes to the total concept, the total mosaic. The concept of intelligence or general mental ability provides us with a useful analogy. The IQ, for example, is a global measure of intelligence that can be subdivided into a number of specific mental factors such as verbal comprehension, numerical ability, spatial relations, and perceptual speed.

There is not yet complete agreement as to how many basic climate dimensions there are, but this is not unusual. Although psychologists have been measuring such things as intelligence and personality for a long time, there is still much disagreement regarding the number of underlying dimensions. Personality dimensions, for example, range from Eysenck's (1976) 3 to the Big 5 of Costa and McCrae (1997) to Cattell, Cattell, and Cattell's (1994) 5 global, 16 primary, and 12 secondary traits. It is our guess that if a number of the best-developed climate dimensions was studied in combination we would probably end up with a dozen or so stable (i.e., reliable) and relatively independent scales that could be appropriately used with a majority of organizations.

An important distinction between generic climate and strategic climate has been made by Schneider (1990); Schneider, Bowen, Ehrhart, and Holcombe (2000); and Schneider, White, and Paul (1998). The generic dimensions would be used across settings (e.g., units, functions, branches) to assess what might be called "organizational health" (our words), or the pervasive sense of "employee well-being needed to facilitate work accomplishment" (Schneider et al., 2000, p. 34). These basic measures could then be supplemented by tailor-made items that have a particular focus such as customer service (Schneider, 1990, 2000), safety climate (Zohar, 1980), and innovation (Abbey & Dickson, 1983). Similarly, supplementary items might be added to measure the unique perceptions of a particular group of stakeholders, such as board members, shareholders, or suppliers.

How Independent Should the Scales Be?

Ideally, researchers would like the climate dimensions to have not only relatively low correlations with one another but also substantial correlations with the overall climate measure. Although there is no hard and fast rule as to the level of interscale correlation required for scale independence, Ashkanasy et al. (2000) suggest that we should not be too stringent because reductive approaches may be counterproductive. They argue that "in organizational culture studies, the more parsimonious solution is not necessarily the most useful one," and they note that "some quantitative researchers have begun to question the tenant of parsimony that is generally pursued by their colleagues" (p. 143). Hawkins (1997), for example, stated that researchers should take care not to "reductively simplify the depth and richness of the culture perspective of organizations" (p. 420).

As a rule-of-thumb guideline, it is noted that two basic mental factors, verbal comprehension and numerical ability, are considered to be quite independent, even though they often correlate in the .50–.60 range. Moreover, some scales on personality tests such as the Minnesota Multiphasic Personality Inventory have even higher correlations but are believed to have independent diagnostic value (Butcher, Dahlstrom, Graham, Tellegen, & Kaemmer, 1989; Thumin, 2002; Thumin & Barclay, 1993). "It is often overlooked that even though factors have overlapping variance, they still can have discriminating effects and measure meaningfully different constructs" (Ashkanasy et al., 2000, p. 143).

In Table 4, with the exception of the .83 correlation between Organizational Flexibility and Organizational Honesty, the interscale correlations were reasonably low, that is, between .35 and .73, indicating an acceptable degree of independence. It may be that the squared correlations (i.e., the overlapping variances presented below the diagonal in Table 4) provide us with a more meaningful representation of scale independence than do the interscale correlations. The overlapping variances range from a low of 12% to a high of 69%.

As expected, each climate dimension correlated very substantially with the SOC, indicating that each was contributing significantly to the overall climate score. Specifically, the correlations ranged from .64 for Community Involvement to .91 for Organizational Honesty, with corresponding overlapping variances of 41% and 83% respectively.

Redundancy Revisited: Climate, Job Satisfaction, and Employee Attitude

Early on, Guion (1973) raised the question as to whether "organizational climate" is not merely another term for job satisfaction and employee attitude. Johansson (1973) and James and Jones (1974) have also suggested that climate and job satisfaction are highly related and redundant, whereas other researchers (Downey, Hellriegel, Phelps & Slocum, 1975; Payne, Fineman, & Wall, 1976; Schnake, 1983; Schneider & Snyder, 1975) have believed that the two entities are conceptually distinct. A number of climate instruments, such as the one used in

TABLE 4. Correlation Matrix and Overlapping Variances for Survey of Organizational Characteristics (SOC) Scales

Scale	Between Scale Correlations							
	A	B	C	D	E	F	G	SOC
A. Organizational Flexibility								
B. Consideration	35	59	54	69	70	83	52	89
C. Job Satisfaction	29	37	61	48	57	65	35	79
D. Structural Clarity	48	23	17	41	62	58	42	76
E. Future With the Organization	49	32	38	37	61	64	44	72
F. Organizational Honesty	69	42	34	41	53	73	54	86
G. Community Involvement	27	12	18	19	29	37	61	91
H. SOC	79	62	58	52	74	83	41	64

Note. All *rs* based on *N* of 171. Between-scale correlations appear to the right of the diagonal, and overlapping variances appear to the left.

the present study, include job satisfaction items, which some investigators would view to represent a methodological shortcoming.

Treating job satisfaction as an output variable, Lawler, Hall, and Oldham (1974) found significant correlations between a number of climate factors and job satisfaction measures. However, treating job satisfaction as merely one dimension of climate, we also found the two measures to be highly correlated, with an r of .76 between Scales C and SOC (a value that is somewhat inflated because Scale C is part of the SOC). But the point is that we can always (or nearly always) expect to find a strong relationship between climate and job satisfaction because the two concepts are intimately interrelated. Feelings about one's job will inevitably affect feelings about one's organization, and vice versa.

To some extent, the decision to treat job satisfaction as a dimension of climate or as a related but independent and conceptually distinct measure appears to be a matter of personal preference. Although a good case has been made that climate and job satisfaction are conceptually distinct, the case for the proposal that climate measures should never include job satisfaction items is less convincing. In fact, one might well argue that any climate measure devoid of a job satisfaction scale would indeed be a deficient measure of organizational climate.

In any event, it does seem that the role of job satisfaction needs further clarification. Given that job satisfaction and climate are so highly correlated, can we say with certainty that they are conceptually distinct and that job satisfaction is not an integral part of climate? Could we not as easily claim that some less controversial climate dimension (e.g., Consideration or Organizational Honesty) is also conceptually distinct from climate and therefore not to be considered a part of climate? Analogically speaking, we note that perceptual speed and spatial-relations ability are conceptually very distinct from intelligence (i.e., general mental ability) but each is assuredly an integral part of the intelligence concept.

And, other questions remain. When considering the role of job satisfaction and its relation to climate, there are various possibilities: (a) Contrary to prevailing opinion, job satisfaction is merely one important dimension of climate; (b) the "climate-causes-satisfaction" hypothesis is correct, and job satisfaction is essentially a dependent variable that varies directly as a function of how good or bad the organizational climate happens to be; (c) job satisfaction is an intervening variable that is determined by the quality of the organizational climate, but that, in turn, influences perhaps a number of performance behaviors and organizational outcomes; and (d) job satisfaction is an independent, stand-alone predictor variable that is neither something caused by climate nor a part of climate, but which directly impacts various performance behaviors and/or organizational outcomes.

Finally, Guion's (1973) challenging question as to the relationship between climate and employee attitude seems to have been largely ignored. The present

authors believe that they are essentially the same thing and that any good, solid measure of climate is inevitably also a good, solid measure of employee attitude (namely, of aggregate perceptions as to “the way things are around here”; Reichers & Schneider, 1990, p. 22).

Should Climate Be Considered Descriptive or Evaluative?

The question of whether climate should be considered descriptive or evaluative, to some extent, is at the heart of the ongoing methodological controversy that separates the climate folks from the culture folks, the social psychological approach from the anthropological approach, and the so-called “objective” approach from the subjective approach. Also, the question relates to the distinction that some researchers have made between organizational climate and psychological climate (James & Jones, 1974; Joyce & Slocum, 1982; Payne & Pugh, 1976). Putting aside for now the interesting distinction that has been made between organizational and psychological climates, we believe it fair to say that, for those many researchers who view climate as a perceptual phenomenon, as aggregated cognitions or psychological interpretations, it is clearly the evaluative approach that gives life and meaning to an organization and helps to define both its climate and its culture in a significant way (James, James, & Ashe, 1990; Schneider, 1990).

For example, is it more important to know (a) that an organization’s span of control is five, or that subordinates feel their boss never has time to answer questions; (b) that organizational policy professes equal growth opportunity for all based on merit, or that employees see advancement based only on nepotism and favoritism; and (c) that the corporate credo is to operate in a highly ethical manner at all times, or that employees view the organization as corrupt and unethical to a fault?

Schnake (1983) claims that climate measures are intended to be descriptive, as opposed to evaluative and that responses should be devoid of affect. The authors would argue the exact opposite—that to most climate researchers, evaluative responses are viewed as crucial and indispensable in understanding an organization’s climate. Also, as noted by LaFollette and Sims (1975), there is an inherent problem in attempting to divorce description from feeling because the two are intimately integrated, inextricably intertwined. One simply cannot describe an organizational attribute without first perceiving it; and once it has been perceived, an arousal of meaning, an interpretation, and an evaluation have already occurred. Even if asked to do so, would employees be able to provide raw, untreated descriptions of organizational attributes devoid of interpretations and feelings? More important, if we were somehow able to filter out all affect and opinion from employee perceptions, we would be left with little more than a collection of bland, barren, sterile observational comments that would contribute little to our understanding of an organization’s climate or its culture.

Climate Versus Culture: The Never-Ending Debate

Viewpoints regarding the relationship between climate and culture range from the viewpoints of those who believe these concepts to be very similar, if not identical (Katz & Kahn, 1978; Schneider, 1990) to the viewpoints of those who believe them to be markedly different (Ott, 1989; Trice & Beyer, 1993). In part, researchers have attempted to distinguish climate from culture by contrasting historical and methodological differences between anthropology and psychology (Reichers & Schneider, 1990; Schneider, 2000). Anthropology's approach is said to be more descriptive and more concerned with an organization's archival materials, stereotypes, jargon, rituals, and symbols and is characterized by a dearth of empirical research. By contrast, psychology's approach is described as more quantitative and empirical, more inclined to employ surveys and rating scales, and more concerned with organizational effectiveness.

Schneider (2000) believes that climate causes culture but that culture also causes climate, whereas Schein (2000) believes that climate is merely an artifact of culture. Regarding methodology, Schein claims that the survey approach is superficial and possibly unethical, and that a questionnaire, regardless of how well designed, cannot tap the deeper levels of organizational culture. He further suggests that we use the clinical research model for studying culture, emphasizing the unconscious, repressed nature of culture. In conducting culture studies, he stresses the need to develop trust and rewarding relationships between the consultant and organizational members. He advocates such things as self-analysis, one-on-one interviews, and small focus groups to reveal the deeper levels of organizational culture.

The authors believe that Schein (2000) underestimates the value of survey methodology, and we disagree with the idea that only superficial information can be obtained using a survey approach. The field of consumer psychology provides countless examples whereby survey methodology has been used to obtain information dealing with delicate, sensitive, even psychologically threatening topics, such as insomnia, bladder control, dysmenorrhea, and erectile dysfunction. The clinical approach (especially one-on-one interviews and focus groups) can certainly be of value in most studies of culture (or climate)—but there is no need to treat an organizational culture as though it were an organizational neurosis.

Regardless of how useful the clinical approach may be, it is not typically the beginning and end of a research endeavor. Rather, it is likely to be of greatest value in the preliminary phase of a larger study, when one is in the process of generating ideas and developing hypotheses, which can then be incorporated into a quantitative follow-up survey with appropriate groups of stakeholders. Of course, if participant handwriting is disguised, the follow-up survey can also contain qualitative (open-end) questions in addition to the more easily quantifiable check lists, rating scales, and the like. Further, if desired, the broad-based survey can be expanded by conducting personal interviews with select subsamples of stakeholders to obtain additional qualitative information.

We certainly agree with Schein that a trusting relationship is crucially important in culture studies, but this is true regardless of whether we are conducting in-depth interviews with a few key people, or assuring all employees that they may express their honest opinions without fear of reprisal from a vengeful boss.

Bridging the Ideological Gap

In attempting to bridge the ideological gap between culture and climate, let us make a somewhat radical suggestion: that we stop using the term “climate” altogether and agree that “culture” is the richer, more meaningful, more all-encompassing term. At least theoretically, this conceptual shift should not be too bitter a pill for the climate folks to swallow, nor overly difficult to accomplish because most climate researchers have felt all along that they have been measuring culture—that their measures of aggregate perceptions are essentially estimates (probably the best possible estimates) of organizational culture. The authors fully agree with Payne (2000, p. 166), who states explicitly, “it is possible to claim that climate is a way of measuring culture.”

However, if the term “climate” is simply too deeply rooted in organizational research literature to discard, we should at least take the position, going forward, that climate is the most important single measure of the broader concept called “culture” and that without measuring the aggregate perceptions of stakeholder groups, it would be difficult, probably impossible, to obtain a meaningful, realistic picture of an organization’s culture.

A second crucial point is that we must strive to be eclectic, flexible, and open-minded in our approach to measuring organizational culture. This view is advocated by a number of investigators, including Ashkanasy et al. (2000), Denzin (1978), Duncan (1989), Payne (2000), Rousseau (1990), Reichers and Schneider (1990), Siehl and Martin (1988), and Schneider (2000). We must respect and appreciate the considerable variety of methodologies available to us, use all the tools in our interdisciplinary tool kit, and use them in combination whenever possible. By all means, let us examine traditions, symbols, rituals, pronouncements, and the like in attempting to get a handle on organizational culture. And certainly let us conduct in-depth interviews and focus interviews with key individuals to develop the best possible questionnaires to use in follow-up surveys with appropriate groups of stakeholders. We may all continue to have our own personal predilections as to which approach is contributing most importantly to the final mosaic. However, most researchers should be able to agree that a multidisciplinary, multi-methodological endeavor will likely give researchers the best, most revealing, and most accurate assessment of organizational culture.

AUTHOR NOTES

Fred J. Thumin is a professor emeritus at Washington University, St. Louis in Missouri, an adjunct professor at Washington University in St. Louis, and president of the

Applied Psychology Center, LLC. He is also a diplomate in organizational and business consulting psychology, and a past president of the Missouri Psychological Association. His research interests are in the areas of organizational culture, ability and personality testing, test construction, and consumer psychology. **Laurie J. Thumin** has 8 years experience in business advisory and corporate finance working for Ernst & Young, LLP, and the Walt Disney Company. She holds an MBA from Cambridge University and an MS in accounting from the University of Southern California. Her research interests are cognitive psychology, human creativity, and art markets.

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